MASQUE OF SHADOWS

BY ARTHUR E.J. LEGGE

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For Jester with best love
from a sort of supernumerary
godmother.
March 2 1902

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A MASQUE OF SHADOWS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

SUNSHINE AND SMOKE. A Book of Verse

WIND ON THE HARPSTRINGS Poems

TOWN AND COUNTRY POEMS

A MASQUE OF SHADOWS

BY

ARTHUR E. J. LEGGE

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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

ATHELSTAN

MICHAEL

HERMIONE

CORALIE

922009

A MASQUE OF SHADOWS

SCENE I

Exterior of a village church on the shores of the Lake of Como. Through the open door the interior of the church is visible, and prominent near the entrance is a gorgeously dressed figure of the Virgin Mary. Behind the church the Lake glitters in the sunlight.

ATHELSTAN *is lying on the turf near the door of the church.*

ATHELSTAN

Now for a day-dream—cultured taste requires it,
Fashion demands it, before this lake of blue,
Fluted with gold where the glorious noon-day fires it;
Dolce—etcetera;—the proper thing to do.
Here custom gathers from dull, commercial nations
Sad, fat, pathetic, worthy children of the age,
Laughably jogs at their slow imaginations,
Calls for an opera, and offers them a stage.

Each of us labours to polish up the fancies
Counted poetical, and suited to the scene,—
Lake!—mountains!—sunshine!—Italy!—Romance is
Not so *very* threadbare as she might have been.
Poor old Romance! How bravely have I followed her
O'er slopes of foolishness and flats of commonplace,
Fought through the mist of mockery that swallowed her,
Made for my heart's goal the vision of her face!
Day after day has the cruel journey tired me,
Weary and foiled have I halted on the hill;
One noble thought through the darkest hour inspired me,
One voice was never hushed,—I hear it still.
Dead are my worldly hopes; faded is ambition;
Love has eluded me; wealth has missed my way;
Far on the road that the pious call perdition,
Stubborn as in early youth, I hold to-day
This to be the first and only end of living,—
Just to taste and learn and suffer,—hear and see,
Make the most of moments that the Gods are giving,
Count it rather good to *do*,—but best to *be*;

Not too much expectant, though despairing never,
Dreaming, laughing, loving, while windy Fortune's breath
Blows my bark adventurous on Life's broad river
Down to the sunset and the ocean pools of Death.

An old PEASANT WOMAN *enters the church and kneels down before the image of the Virgin.*

I fancy some æsthetic prig might say
Fate seemed a trifle "obvious" to-day,
Granting appropriate pathos for the scenery,—
Like sermons pointed at a vacant Deanery.
This poor old woman, bowed with toil and years,
Whose life of drudgery has no time for tears,
Confiding lays the burden of her soul
Before this tawdry, painted, waxen doll.
Our usual cant had envied her,—yet smiled
Indulgent pity on the grown-up child
Who learns not of our wisdom;—ah, what fools
Are those who disavow the ancient schools,
But feign to mourn departed dogmas yet!
I hate this old imposture of regret!
Pilate's unanswered riddle may have haunted
My path and saddened me; it has not daunted
My fierce resolve to banish all pretence,
All compromise demanding of the sense

A refuge from the spirit. Nought is clear;
But little hope involves as little fear.
He who his own demand for pity smothers
Has sometimes more, perhaps, to spare for others.

CORALIE *comes in.*

CORALIE

Shall I guess at your thoughts, dear friend?—You play
Such various parts I could barely tell
What cord had been touched in your heart to-day
By the noon-day magic, the dreamy spell
Of this rich, translucent riot of blue
That engulphs and governs earth, water, and sky,
Till reality swoons in its cool, deep hue,
Where even the passionate sunbeams die
With their yellow dissolved,—and my warm red blood
Loses its crimson phrenzy and flows
With a chained, blue calm, like a mist-veiled flood
Unflushed by the flame where the sunset glows.
Do you like my nonsense?—and what of *your* sense,
As you lie there, blinking your thoughtful eyes?
Is your mood emotional, wrapt, intense,
Grimly humorous, gravely wise?

Is laughter or sentiment reigning now?
Do tears or mockery colour your view?
There is only *one* clear brand on your brow,—
You are always a poet at heart——

ATHELSTAN

And you
Are ever a poem. Oh, sweet wild bird!
Tender and sad as a woodland sigh
When wavering leaves on the boughs are stirred
In an autumn whisper, I hear the cry
Of a worn-out passion, whose haunting shade
Wails o'er the tomb of its hope in my soul,
As I think of that brief, dear dream, when we played
Love's game of folly: 'tis strange that the bowl
Should carry the scent of the wine so long
With the last drop dry,—that the weary brain
Should ring with the sound of a phantom song
That will never be sung in the world again.

CORALIE

Are you sure of your "never"?

ATHELSTAN

Too sure, alas!
Our spirits have met on a moonless night

To call through the dusk, and be greeted,—and pass.
Mine is too heavy and yours too light
For the yoke of such union. Still may burn
Your kiss on my lips,—but I dare not look
Through the ledger in heart's blood written, and learn
The worth of your kisses. I close the book.

CORALIE

What are any kisses worth?
Take them for the blossom thrown
Lightly on your patch of earth,
With æolian laughter blown
Here and there, a gleam to bring
Through the cloud in Nature's eyes,
Move the wanton birds to sing,
Lead the dance of butterflies.

Love is like a summer day,
Rich with drowsy warmth and light,
Fleeting as the dreams that play
Through the sensuous folds of night.
Fill the wine-cup! Taste the fruit!
Breathe the perfume of the rose!
Soon the maggot gnaws the root,
Flowers are faded, Summer goes.

ATHELSTAN

I thank you for your sermon; but you preach
To one who, disillusioned, yet must follow
This phantom; truths that Life has failed to teach
Sound empty from *your* lips. Though all prove hollow
While breath is in me I shall seek the face
Of her whose thoughts find in my soul a mirror.
For one brief hour *you* filled the vacant place.

CORALIE

And now your wisdom shuns that ancient error!
I, also, grieve for unattained desire
Just at this moment; while your soul is burning
For Love whereto even Angels might aspire,
I want some chocolates,—and this humble yearning
Seems void of all fulfilment. Oh, look there!
Surely a perfect picture might be painted
Of yonder peasant woman's silent prayer,
Within the cool dark church. How worn, how sainted
Her poor old wrinkled face! I fear the stones
Are likely to repay with rheumatism
The adoring zeal that bends her aged bones,—
Which *our* good folk call heresy and schism.

Oh, why should this fair world, that might contain
Eternal stores of youth, strength, rapture, beauty,
Be poisoned with the lethal draught of pain,
Sorrow, old age, constraint, and tyrant duty?
Our dreams are anodynes. *Her* toil, *her* faith,
My life that plays with power and love and laughter,
Are screens wherewith we hope to hide the wraith
That haunts us *here*, that threatens us hereafter.
Yet fain would I be foolish while I can,
Wisdom's a doubtful drug for the complexion.
I want some chocolates——

ATHELSTAN

Might not this young man
Serve as a substitute for your refection?

MICHAEL *comes out of the church and stands gazing at the Lake.*

MICHAEL

'Tis good to be out once more in the air.
The damp, chill breath of this cave of prayer
Strikes cold to my blood. How long will it last,
This fetish taught by knaves of the past
To fools of the present,—the old, dead sham
Of the wrath of God and the martyred Lamb,

And the sickly creed that would fain control
The natural thirst of a human soul
For life's rich vintage? Well, it may do
For a worn-out ship with a slavish crew,
For this woman who bends a suppliant knee
To a pink wax image,—but pardon me,
Good priests, if I break from your well-planned net!
Wallowing cowardice, weak regret,
The fraud that would barter a selfish vice
For as surely a selfish Paradise,
The cant of a brotherly love that throws
Your life at the feet of your fiercest foes,
The lofty word and the grovelling deed,—
Poison and pap! Let my soul be freed
From your servile terrors. I take my place
Here in the ranks of a conquering race.
I will wrest my right from the hand of Fate,
From the women that love and the men that hate,
I will tax all knowledge and taste all joys,
I will fathom all passions, and choose for toys
The fires that flame in the heart of the world.
I will move like a lonely meteor hurled
On an unruled track in the skies of Thought,
Beautiful, strong, resistless,—nought
Shall stand in my path. I will make me king
Of a new proud order, governing

These human sheep with a pungent rule
That shall blot the coward, the slave, the fool
From the legion of Man ; I will raise my kind
To the level and rank of the gods, unbind
The chains of old folly, and lead them free
Worthy to walk through the earth with *me*.

CORALIE

Beautiful, radiant, godlike, as the dream
Of some old Grecian sculptor, or the theme
Of frenzied Sappho, or the white-limbed youth
Who brought to foam-born Cytherea ruth
And amorous unattainment, now appears
My star, who beckoned through the gloom of years.
Fair Sir——

MICHAEL

Who art thou, dainty damsel? Know
That, like the graceful god of lyre and bow,
I ask, not yield, subjection. If thy brain
Throbs with the thought of binding in the train
Of captives to thy beauty one slave more,
Abandon that false hope. I never wore
A woman's fetters. I am one who treads
A trampled pathway o'er submissive heads.

I will not toil to flatter, stoop to sue;
But win by force of conquest. If my view
Seem brutal, coarse, presumptuous,—hurt thy pride,
Nettle thy sex,—I pray thee, stand aside.
I have no leisure for the drawing-room game
Of gossip, jest, and compliment;—the flame
I kindle forges life and death.

CORALIE

Your mood
Chimes well with mine. Weary of being wooed
In the old dull way by those who give their sighs,
Their clumsy flatteries, their familiar lies,
A spare half-hour, sometimes a foolish soul,
For love—desire—how call you it? their goal
Is this warm, breathing body,—weary, then,
Of the loose-lipped insincerities of men,
Your half-contemptuous challenge I take up.
Pardon a bold demand! Be pleased to sup
This night with me. I own a humble nest
In a warm hollow of the mountain's breast,
Not far removed. There will my table stand
In the dim garden, screened on either hand
By grey rock ramparts, chestnut woods, and slopes
Terraced with tiny cornfields, meshed with ropes

Of trellised greenery by festooning vines.
Odorous flowers, ripe fruit, and dainty wines,
Nature and art perfecting wholesome fare,
Faint, dreamy music, soft, voluptuous air,
The slumbering cypresses, the velvet sky,
The stars, the lake, the moonlight,—worthy fly
Think you this picture of the spider's web
Can draw you for an evening's flow and ebb?

MICHAEL

Which is the fly and which the spider time
Alone can show. I thank you. I will climb
This evening to your fortress, and begin
The siege that you have challenged.

CORALIE

I shall win.
But, meanwhile, will you walk with me a space?
From where the road turns yonder is the place
Of our encounter clear. That brooding hill
Slopes to my garden gateway.

MICHAEL

As you will.

[*They go out.*

ATHELSTAN

" Femina è cosa mobil per natura ! "
Are platitudes immortal? That one line to-day,
As when Petrarch impatient wrote it of his Laura,
Gives the whole truth of womankind we dare to say.
A creed, a dress, a sugar-plum, a game, a lover,
Whate'er the kind and quality, she likes them new.
Her motives? There we halt. Could Solomon discover
The riddle's right solution? though he tried some few!
This woman nearly loved me once; and altogether
I loved her for a season. Is it turning cold?
How foolish to have shivered in this warm bright weather;
Better to leave these graveyard ghosts. The tale is told.

[*He goes out.*

The old PEASANT WOMAN *comes out of the church.*

OLD WOMAN

Surely the Holy Mother has heard my prayer.
Her blessed smile is afloat in the peaceful air.
At her feet I leave my morning's burden of care.

My melons will fatten; the warm good sun will shine
To ripen the corn, to purple the grape on the vine.
There will be bread in the winter. What gifts are
mine!

But best is the love by the sainted Virgin given
To soothe the tired-out hearts that have toiled and
striven;
A Woman to hear the cry of women in Heaven.

SCENE II

A lonely spot on the side of a mountain over the Lake of Como.

HERMIONE *alone.*

HERMIONE

Angelus rings! How the deep tones go floating
To moan and murmur through the golden air,
Reproachful voice of lonely bells denoting
To toil-worn souls an hour of peace and prayer.
Wail of a dying Faith! Dethroned and banished
From those high places where its ruined tower
Shelters the mournful ghost of glory vanished,—
Feigned homage, idle form, pretended power,—
The broken genius seeks her humble dwelling
Amid the lowly homes of them that hear
Nature's eternal voices waning, swelling,
With all the childlike trust, the reverent fear
That furnish creeds. Far from her lost dominion
She haunts the wood where mountain torrents roar,

Sighing to simple hearts, or, with bent pinion,
Droops to the village street that lines the shore
Of yon blue waves, and threads the gleaming waters
To upbraid the roving boatman, and to cry
O'er land and lake for unforgetful daughters,
For faithful sons,—and silence gives reply!
Oh, cold stone image at the roadway's turning,
With rude, love-guided labour carved to keep
The flame on altars of remembrance burning
In hearts that climb their Calvary,—the steep,
Long mountain-chain of life,—Thou art the token
Of sacred suffering, of eternal love!
Though they who claim his countenance have broken
The law thy Prototype declared above
All earthly codes, yet nought annuls the meaning
Of truth the world pretends to hold, and scorns,—
The burden of that head so tortured, leaning
To the scarred shoulder, with its crown of thorns
Wounding the gentle face. Our old creeds languish,
Losing their light beneath the dusk of doubt;
Yet will that look, holy with love and anguish,
Survive the priestly legends blotted out.
Christ! Now we dare not own thy former title.
If Gods there be, beyond our furthest ken
Their kingdom lies; but ever fresh and vital
Lives the devotion of a Man for men.

Thy work, a deathless print on pages human
Remains, but Time unfolds the eternal plan.
Dare I believe that to the hand of Woman
May pass the torch held flaming first by Man?
Prophet or God! The poor, blind, helpless mortals
Who need a Hearkener to hear their cry,
Who lay their load before thy Temple's portals,
Grow weary, waiting for some faint reply
More certain than the vague assurance given
Of Paradise for those who prove their worth.
They doubt the promise of a Sunday Heaven
Who now begin to see this week-day Earth
As one great living entity, and reason
That, as Death deals with substance, so the soul,
Endowed with separate birthright for a season,
May melt at last in the all-embracing Whole,
Gaining perhaps therefrom a wider being,
A larger personality, a range
Beyond all thought of learning, hearing, seeing,—
Or some undreamed, uncomprehended change.

But vainly do we plumb the unsounded ocean
To whose dark bed our souls one day will sink,
While we are tossing in the white commotion
Of foam-crowned surface waters. Link by link
The cable strains. Be mine the task to waken

Courage in drooping hearts that know not hope,
To bid them leave the little harbour shaken
With angry winds, sever the wave-worn rope,
And steer for the wide sea with no misgiving,
Far from the coast where pleasant havens lie,
Confident only that Love's light is living,
Though the sun fail them and the cold stars die.

ATHELSTAN *comes in*

ATHELSTAN

Drunk and dizzy with all the splendour
Wrought by the waning day,
Crimson hour of colours that render
Moods for the soul enchanted, tender,
Chords that the fairies play,
I throb with the glow of an ancient fire
Reckoned as dead with the folly of youth,
I am wooed by the chant of a mystic choir,
And the song of truth.
Here, oh here,
Where the regal bosom of mountain slopes to the sky,
The faint far voices of all that is earthly die,
And pure, cold, clear
Is the atmosphere
Of this mental summit, where Thought, with a mien austere,

Broods o'er the human cry.
Now for a space are the torturing questions lulled,
The desolate hunger, the ache, and the anguish cease;
With a brain no longer dulled
By the load of importunate passion, I taste of peace.
My soul goes out like a laughing brook
Through the forest of dreams, when the wind is still,
To follow the gully of rocks and look
For the river beyond the hill,
Where the tiny current at last may blend
With the deep, mysterious flood that flows
Into the shadow where all streams end
As there they rose.
And surely to meet my mood
Fate sendeth a woman with understanding eyes
Wherein more calm and comfort lies
Than is even gained from that magic food
Of the wanderer's hunger—solitude.
Fair lonely spirit dwelling in this wild place,
Fain would I talk with thee!
Fresh-wakened memories come from thy haunting face,
There are ghosts in thine eyes. What news of our nameless race
Hast thou for me?

HERMIONE

There is no news, brother.
There is only the distant cheer
Of the heart that cries to another,
Of the love that has conquered fear.
The world is asleep in its arctic night
Where pale souls glide through the frozen gloom,
Scattered and dim are the gleams of light
Piercing the pall of doom,
But the few are keeping their lanterns bright,
And truth has been saved from the tomb,
And many a hard-won field has been fought
By the chosen soldiers who take their stand
Wielding the weapons of armoured Thought.
Are you one of the band?

ATHELSTAN

In all humility
I claim to be
One of that tribe whose demon bids them stray
Through woodland path and wilderness, away
From formal garden-plots and prison-walls.
All my life long
Has my heart heard the unknown spirit that calls,
Cloaking her message in the wild bird's song,

The surge and whirl of foamy waterfalls,
The meadow-whisper born of flowering grasses,
The summer-hush where bees
Hum faint beneath the trees,
The sweet low chime when rippling water passes.
From earliest boyhood in my bosom ached
The blank of lonely banishment, the thirst
Ever unslaked
For wine no mortal vineyard yields. Accursed
I trod the crowded paving-stones of life,
I joined in all delights, desires of men,
Made firm my sinews in the playful strife
Of sport; curbed brain and body; strove to pen
My hopes and dreams within the little round
Of daily tasks—to draw the measured load
Of common aspirations—harnessed—bound—
A yoke-worn bullock, with a patch of ground
A manger and a goad.

But all was vain.
Through beating footsteps on my workshop floor
Again, again, again
I heard that voice float by the open door,
And, casting off convention's gilded chain,
My spirit led me out o'er wold and moor,
Heedless of all that worldlings hope to gain.

I knew there was no peace,
No calmness, no conviction anywhere.
I knew the unanswered questions would not cease
To rend my brain, to strip my reason bare
Of all illusions. But I chose my part.
Custom, authority I counted nought,
Parted from worldly prudence, fear or fashion,
Looked in my heart to learn what nature taught,
And found no certain impulse there save passion,
Passion of love and thought.
Then, hoisting sail, before that wind I went.
I tried the love of humankind. I toiled
To fit my soul for an environment
Of humble self-forgetfulness, unsoiled
By cankering ambition. Thwarted, foiled,
I laboured on in dark unheeded ways
To help the poor dumb multitude, to raise
Some downcast brother from the mire,—and found
Much mildew, drought, and blight, and barren ground,
A thin small harvest after many days,
Which when I came to store
Left my fierce heart as empty as before.

I tried the love of women. Surely there
Must lie the gate to that mysterious land
My soul would fain discover.

I took my heart's whole fortune in my hand,
And went into the market-place, to stand
Till one should bring for sale from anywhere
The dream-life of a lover.
And many a painted hope I bought with grief,
And many a burning hour of anguish tasted.
Faith proved a snare and passion played the thief.
Bitter the bargain; hungry Love denied,
Or rapture false and brief,
Then long regret for all the truth that died,
The tears, the travail wasted.

I tried the love of learning. Rough and steep
The pathway through that cobweb world the brain
Weaves for its habitation. But the smile
Of sunbeams bathed its rocks, and for a while
My worn corporeal part was lulled to sleep,
Its anguish blotted out by mental strain
As sunlight murders lamplight. Cool and deep
The oblivion-bearing waters that I drank;
I felt the wind of freedom on my face,
I heard unearthly whispers float through space,
I breathed strange balm from flowers on every bank.
But oft the vision broke,
And to the world that claimed me I awoke,
To take once more the burden on my back,

Problems the mind must probe and lusts that rack
The weary flesh. Then, final stage, I learned
To read the grim law branded on the wall;
In each new fire of thought a heart is burned:
To know is nothing, but to feel is all.

And now I walk through earth,
A pilgrim who but lacks a pilgrimage,
Reading the book of life from page to page,
Sure of my own incompetence to gauge
The story's worth,
Still guarding here and there a feeble spark
Of hope and love, with purpose fixed to pay
Heed to the voice that calls me through the fires
Of mortal cares and questions and desires,
Knowing that those alone can face the dark
Who do not fear the day.

HERMIONE

Have you no larger creed?

ATHELSTAN

I scarce would claim
For this poor bridle on my thought and deed
So proud a name.

Surely a creed must hold some right divine
O'er the free reason it was forged to fetter.
If souls require a passport, here is mine!
Have you a better?

HERMIONE

I am a woman; I have trod the road
That other women tread; a garden path
Roofed in by shady boughs—rolled, weeded, swept—
Bordered with flawless turf, and lost beyond
A barred and bolted gate. Young blood was doomed
To hours of anger and impatient scorn
For this my chained and changeless womanhood.
I longed with envious impotence to share
Man's wider destiny. I coveted
The freedom of his choice, the power to taste
Wonderful vintage of experience.
I fancied that the road to wisdom lay
Among the crags of passion, through the groves
Of unknown pleasure, o'er the broad vague plain
Of public toil, and pierced, beyond my sight,
The dark and stormy places of the world.
But slowly have I plumbed profounder truth
And seen the starlight poured on woman's way.
Not by the mud-stained robe, nor by the tears
Proclaiming lawless thought, rebellious lust,

She wins the crown of knowledge, but she finds
A purer path for her secluded feet.
Take now your own confession! You have drunk
From all the waterways of life, laid bare
The roots of good and evil. Has your soul
Gathered much comfort there? Worthy reward
For floundering through the labyrinthine bog
To reach no sunnier climate after all
Than this grey cloudland, where the damp mist folds
A curtain round your heart!
I look beyond
The blank of your horizon. Far away
I see the dawn, where long-deluded hopes
Shall find accomplishment, and old foiled dreams
Blossom in golden truth. Yes, I *have* faith,
I *have* a creed, worth all your dreary stock
Of dog-eared, threadbare wisdom, scornful mirth,
And dumb endurance. I shall see this world
Survive its dead delusions, learn at last
To count all life one homogeneous whole,
Adjust the delicate balance, now deranged,
Of the mighty mainspring, sex, soften the male,
Strengthen the female, till the new race comes.
Thus will each human soul accept its place
As part of something so colossal, grand,
Mysterious, that the old desires and hopes,

The individual consciousness, will fade
In pure, transparent ocean-depths of love
Undreamed of; not the love of one for one,
No, nor of one for all; a mystery
Folding within its compass all the loves
Mankind has ever known, adding yet more,
Which we, still blinded by the childish dream
Of separate personality, must learn
To reach by strenuous thought. So will depart
Clamour of passion, pain of questioning
The sphynx of doubt, all those unruly storms
Whose buffet marred you. We shall satisfy
Body and soul with perfect harmonies.
Even now I hear them. I am going forth
To soothe the quivering world. No more, no more
Shall man be plunged in seas of apathy,
Or need to tell the story you have told.

ATHELSTAN

Dreamer of beautiful dreams!
Such hopes were ever the fruit of a virgin soil
Ere the land be furrowed by years of toil,
And the ploughing of countless teams.
Gladly enough would I share
Your pleasant, utopian creed, but alas! I know

That obdurate Time will wither and Fate will tear
Your visions, and you will go
Through the rough, dark valley where I have walked.
The passions you thought to have missed, the care,
The doubt and the sorrow, are lurking there.
They are watching your steps from the caves below,
And will not be baulked.

Farewell! The marching hosts of the night
Sweep silently on with their banner of gloom.
I shall ask, when we meet again,
If your soul has cheated the hounds of doom,
If the mortal burden has proved so light,
And the mortal path so plain.

[*He goes out.*

HERMIONE

How dare he lift his warning hand to cast
A shadow o'er my thoughts, hoping to blast
My radiant aspirations with the breath
Of mockery? Poor disdainful slave of death!
Thinks he to drag me downward with a sneer?
Ah no! His voice was gentle. Calm and clear
His eyes looked through their sadness like a veil.

How my heart answered when he told the tale
Of wasted toil and conflict ! Can *I* fail?

Are you alive, then, doubt ? Oh, brave, kind heart,
I would so sure a comrade might have part
In my long labour. Yet am I ashamed
Of such weak thought. Since first my purpose flamed
Clear in the sky before me, I have known
That to the crest of Truth my pathway lies alone.

Oh, voices whispering through the chestnut boughs,
Oh, shining eyes, agleam from yonder stars,
I own your grave rebuke. Eternal vows
Hold me a willing prisoner. Though their bars
Gave brief admittance to one thought that mars
The peace diffusing in my soul, before,—
A hush like this deep night, where fiery cars
Carry the meteor hopes,—still, doubt once more
Dies in lake-murmurs breathed faint o'er the haunted shore.

The fleshly tumult fades ; my heart grows calm.
White with the first pale silver of the moon,
Sweet with the fragrant breath, the soothing balm

Of dew-bathed flowers beneath the dusk. How soon
Shall strength and peace be blended,—night with noon,—
Till the old sexual strife be cast away,
And all the mortal octaves sound in tune
On life's wide key-board when the passions play?
Oh, mountain-torrents, waft an answer through your spray!

SCENE III

The garden of CORALIE'S *Villa. Night.*

CORALIE *and* MICHAEL *seated on a bench.*

CORALIE

Love, you have conquered. In your hands I lay
The key of doors that guard my joy and sorrow,
Protecting memories of yesterday,
And dreams that formed a rampart for to-morrow.
I ask no pledge, no vow.
I care not for the future or the past.
Time but began with our delirious Now,
Nor ends while that shall last.
Once, looking on the dainty pleasure-ground,
The Watteau-picture that a girl is shown,
Well-framed and labelled "Life,"
My hopes were wont to wander till they found
Me ruling on the legendary throne
That waits the fabled wife.

But now I look
No longer for a plain coherent plot
From Destiny, who wrote me in her book
And quite forgot
Whether she framed me for domestic joys,
Family prayers, cooks, knitting, hearth and home,
Love, duty, and obedience, girls and boys,
All the prim paradise, or purposed me to roam
A careless gipsy through the meadow-lands,
The woods, the wastes, the heather,
Scattering life's flowers with my wanton hands,
Or binding them together
In nosegays that should please me for an hour or so
Ere they passed where all things go.

MICHAEL

How long shall a mouldy tradition
Encumber the pathway of truth?
How long shall a woman's ambition,
The splendour and pride of her youth,
The lips made for love, the majestic
And eloquent curve of her limbs,
Be consumed on an altar domestic
With appropriate chanting of hymns?

Not for you such a hypocrite's heaven!
Not for you so unlovely a doom!
To be yoked, overburdened, and driven
Down the wheel-ruts that end in the tomb,
Never tasting the fragrance of roses,
Never breathing the coolness of dew,
In a desert that custom encloses
With a wall for your sex,—not for you!
Like the sleep-laden flowers that scent all
Your garden's voluptuous night,
You are vital, untamed, elemental—
Irresponsible child of delight!
The imperial purple, the charter
Of freedom was yours from your birth.
You were made not to cringe nor to barter
With sanctified hucksters the mirth,
Warm blood, and high courage that move you
To defiance of precept and rule,
For their frigid consent to approve you,
And a prize for good conduct at school.

Our vessel is lifting her anchor,
Let us wave our farewell to the shore,
To the bigots whose envious rancour
Shall pursue and deny us no more.

We will sail for the tropical splendour
Of Love's equatorial land,
Where the wind weaves a harmony tender
From wavelets that lisp on the sand,
Where the senses are wrapped in the coma
Of long lazy days like a swoon,
Till they wake to the wafted aroma
Of a night where the luminous moon
Bathes a world of enchanted illusion
In her rivers of silvery blue,
Revealing the floral profusion
And the colours they blend and subdue.

With a joy that no fears are benumbing
While the long dream of passion shall last,
We will reck not of days that are coming,
We will pine not for days that are past.
We will throw laws and scruples behind us
To the coward who questions and plods:
Not a fiction shall hamper or bind us,
As we walk, with the freedom of gods,
On the clouds of unending ambition,
On the sunbeams of truth, and look down
At the slaves of a dead superstition
With a smile of contempt for their frown.

We will heed no stage-property thunder,
Nor the threat of a watch-dog's pursuit,
As we range the world's orchard and plunder
The goodliest trees of their fruit.
Wealth, leisure, enlightenment, laughter
Are the crown of the spirit that dares.
For a season we reap them,—and after,
If death calls for payment,—who cares?

CORALIE

Ah yes—who cares? It may be, now and then,
Some overlooked regret
Shows how reluctantly the human hen
Learns to forget
Her fondness for the normal poultry-run,
For barn-door gossip, where she need not shun
The damnatory scowl
Of any slander-loving, virtuous fowl,
But lay and hatch, applauded on her nest
By sympathetic cackling from the rest.
Yet all such weakness dies
When through the gloom I see your flaming eyes.
The sweet night throbs
Warm with endless life and love;
Far below a ripple sobs
Round the distant lake; above

Soft amorous sound
Murmurs through olive-leaves and cypress branches,
While the white anguish of the moonbeam blanches
The breathless world around.
The silence grows too deep, the night too dumb—
The load of universal passion seems
To darken and benumb
The soul it fires with such delirious dreams.
My heart is all athirst for music. Come
Out of the starlit dew
To realms of lamplight !—I will sing to you.

[*They go into the house.*

ATHELSTAN *comes out from among the trees.*

ATHELSTAN

Strange that a hungry, lonely heart
Can bear to laugh at the thankless part
By the Fates apportioned, can even gain
A drug for its unromantic pain
In detached amusement, not exempt
From the biting flavour of self-contempt,
As you fill the *rôle* of the pantaloon
In a harlequinade, where the grim buffoon
Destiny, playing the genial clown
With appropriate humour, knocks you down,

When may we claim to be all sincere?
As I lurked in the moon-cast shadows here,
Watching these happier two, the sense
Of a step too near to the sacred fence,
Guarding their privacy, seemed to bring
A subtle sauce for the flavouring
Of dead-sea apples I fain must eat.
There was surely a touch of the bitter-sweet
In the humour moving the Gods to impress
My brain with a dual consciousness.
For there were two of me that stood
Just now in the garden-scented wood.
One looked under the selfish boughs
That usurped the outlook, like broken vows
Trailing over the vista of hope,
And cursed my abortive horoscope.
Now does the jester who shaped my lot
Come to the crowning point of his plot
In the game of Peri-and-Paradise
That he plays with this particular slice
Of my soul. I wonder was there need
For half-closed wounds to open and bleed,
For slumbering passions to wake and tear
My breast with the old, mad, vain despair.
But the other half of me, all the while
Watched with a mournful, scornful smile,

Saw how the harp-strings, passion-frayed,
Jangled and mangled the tune they played
For the hundredth time—how romance required
A hope more buoyant, a heart less tired,
And brave illusion to soften and screen
The palpable faults of the heroine.
And the question beats on my aching brain
If *this* be really the pure Love-pain
That is said to purge like a cleansing fire,
Or only the sting of a man's desire
For flesh in a female mould, the cry
Of a thwarted sexuality.
For, apart from false and prurient shame,
The battle of instinct dare not claim
A tragic title. Oh, mocking Gods,
Smite me with thunderbolts, not with rods!

CORALIE *is heard singing indoors.*

CORALIE [*sings*]

In woodland paths and meadow-ways
I heard the golden lute that rings
A chiming tone when Summer plays
On Love's own strings.
I dashed the dripping leaves apart
That sprayed and drenched my hair with dew

I waited with a burning heart,
And looked for you.

In woodland paths and meadow-ways
I wandered on till Time was dead.
And now, beneath my weary days,
I droop my head
On moss-grown roots, and try to sleep
Where withered boughs their plumage strew
And there, among the red leaves deep,
At last are you.

ATHELSTAN

The comedy grows in humour. That was the song
Her rich voice flung with its passionate force to *me*
In the memory-branding night, whose scars belong
To last year's summer. And I, like a fool, would be
In that web once more. Each proud, importunate note
Wailed and wept through the shadowy, lamplit hush
Of the long, low, oak-beamed room with its sense remote
Of an ancient English life. I could see the flush
On her face, and the curving bosom that swelled and gleamed

With the glitter of jewels—the parted lips, and the eyes
Large and dark in the dusk, while I watched and dreamed
Of Love's deep sea, and the wonderful land that lies
In the mist beyond. And after the final chord
Had died in the throbbing silence, she rose and came
To my curtained window-nook, where the moon-beams poured
Their flood on the carpet, and sheets of their ghostly flame
Lay pale on the world outside, like a dreamland's dawn,
And we passed out into the damp, sweet smell of the rain,
So lately fallen that yet upon blossom and lawn
The clear pearls glistened, and still the song in my brain
Rang like a great bell pealing and deadening sense.
And, as we walked through the whispering garden-bowers
The air was heavily charged with the opulence
Of odours won for the night from a thousand flowers.

And, all in a moment, her mouth was mine, and her hair
Was a silken touch on my cheek, and I felt the throb
Of her heart on my breast, and the leaping blood's despair
In my veins imprisoned clutched at my throat in a sob
As we reeled and glowed in our madness.
And though the sneer
Of Fate's contemptuous laughter came too soon,
To mock at the opiate balm of our atmosphere,
To shatter the dream-world woven in gold by the moon,
Not all the Now or the Never can steal away
That hour of perfect illusion,—
And yet!—and yet!—
Though yon fair idol I knelt to was only clay,
Though there is nought to remember and less to forget,—
Oh, worthless winsome woman, who slew with a laugh
The madcap passion that held us there in the night,—
While my reason joined in wording its epitaph,—
I know that my spirit would starve on a love so light,

Yet I reach my hands for you still,—my pride is dead
My heart would barter its dreams for a single crust
Rather than hunger and pine for the perfect bread
That shall not be given,—but now there is only dust
In my mouth and grey, cold ashes without one spark
In my hands, and my eyes, though burning, shed no tears
To cool their pain, and I am alone in the dark
Calling, and clutching Love's shadow,—and no one hears.

[*He sinks on to the seat and hides his face in his hands.*

HERMIONE *comes out from among the trees.*

HERMIONE

Forgive me, friend, that I should dare to tread
Into the sacred circle of your grief.
There is a sleepless watchman in my heart
Who hears the voice of sorrow; and, to-night
My thoughts are scarcely faithful to my faith.
For though I toil to enjoy the harmonies
Of Life's orchestral whole, I cannot keep
My languid brain from drooping, and so lose

The thread that riotous phrases dominate
The unbalanced music. Though Eternity
Ought to engulf in thunder the faint note
Of finite sorrow, yet the human cry
Strikes, as it should not, a discordant string
That jars in my own breast.

ATHELSTAN

I am ashamed
Of unasked pity for my coward mood.
Yet it may well be false, the shallow pride,
The Stoic burden of secretiveness,
That fears the scornful laughter of a world
Where all is only laughable. Since you
Bring down your cloud-capped thoughts to earth and turn,
As woman, interrogative, kind eyes
In question on my manhood's weakness, how
Can I take shield of reticence? You look
On one of Fate's most mordant jests,—a man
Tormented with the sexual love of love,—
Half the warm-blooded craving that we clothe
In prudish lies, and half the subtler pain
Of starved imagination, truant hope,
And mental loneliness,—a raw wound touched
Suddenly into torture by the wand

Of one who might not remedy the whole
Of that vague yearning, yet has power to yield
A draught of fiery wine transfiguring
The brain so potently that, some brief space,
It apes the true celestial nectar. Old
And stale the comic misery of the hurt!
I am a man—and I have seen a woman,
And all the slow-built wisdom of my life
Abjectly crumbles. While I laugh to see
My wound, I feel the wound my laughter makes.
Laughs also *your* philosophy?

HERMIONE

Poor heart!
I scarce can speak for tears. Oh Hope—kind Hope,
Shine through the darkness of this misty world!
Importunate but fleeting pangs obscure
The truth that should be visible. I have learned
To count these ancient trials nought, to hold
That the slow human caravan has crossed
The desert, and, henceforth, the wild desires,
The old romantic fallacies, the war
Of strong rebellious passions, will not keep
Their fierce preponderance in human life,
But sink subdued into the rolling bars
Whereon are built the peaceful, perfect chords.

Yet your few words, my friend, have shaken deep
The firmament of my conviction. I
Know by the novel beating of my blood,
The strangely sudden sense of aching want
That the great cosmic calm has drugged, not killed
The merely personal claimant. I proposed
To adjust your passion's harp, to tune the strings.
But I have lost the key-note. Help me, Heaven!

ATHELSTAN

Come from this cursed garden! Let us leave
The odorous, enervating flowers that bind
Our senses in their swoon, the dewy depths,
The hushed recesses of these forest glades,
Whose dim, mysterious vagueness seems to cast
Shadows of hesitation on our thoughts
From out the menacing background. You and I
Will not be taken captive in the hour
Of Reason's treachery. What we do shall spring
From calm deliberation, purpose firm,
Not from emotion's unforeseen assault
Surprising our defences. We will go
Out to the clearer moonlight, and the calm
Of open space beneath the sky, whereto
Vigorous breath from mountains blown and scent
Of clean, moist weeds and damp, encrusted rocks,

Wholesomely filtered from the lake, caress
The unagitated bosom of a hill
Where health keeps endless vigil and dull sleep
Holds nought but sick and morbid forces chained.
This air is drugged and poisonously sweet!
Let us have something purer! Come away!

[*They go out together, while* CORALIE *is again heard singing.*

CORALIE [*sings*]

All the banks are ablaze with poppies,
  Ears of wheat are yellow and brown,
Sunlit, dew-wet gossamer copies
  The wafted dance of the thistledown.
Flowers their wealth to the bees are giving,
  Ripe fruit offers a feast to the birds,—
We have a part in the pride of living;
  What shall it yield us?—Words?

Suns go down and summers are ended,—
  (Thus would a moralist drone away)
Time's old fiddle is cracked and mended,
  Only one poor tune can he play.

Work out the ore of the impulse vernal!
Bind the sheaf and plunder the bough!
Which would we look for,—the chance Eternal
Or Love's own period—*Now?*

SCENE IV

Hampstead Heath on a Bank Holiday. A Crowd of MERRY-MAKERS *on all sides.* MICHAEL *stands on a knoll apart, regarding the scene.*

MICHAEL

I have no use for laughter. Yet a smile
Were congruous as I meditate awhile
On this uncultured scene of festival.
Brainless amusement, vulgar pleasure, call
Their votaries from crude and bestial toil
To crude and bestial play. Discoloured soil,
Befouled and trampled turf, the rusty green
Of smoke-dried foliage, whose delicate sheen
Has died before its birth,—a platform fit
For the elaborate and sardonic skit
On ancient pastoral delights. How strange
Fortune's caprice that chartered *me* to range

This low world's puddles like a pirate soul
'Mid paper vessels in a washing-bowl!
I, the first pioneer of that proud race
Time's womb is now maturing to replace
This pigmy breed, must wearily confess
To finding in their squalid ugliness
A burden of repugnant scorn. I long
For earthly comrades, beautiful and strong,
Who would not shame my rightful rule. Yet these
Fulfil their purpose. Are they not the keys
Whereon I play, when Life, my instrument,
Utters the tune I choose? Their backs are bent
For me to walk on. Their slow brains begin
To pay me just acknowledgment. I win
All that I played for—riches, power, esteem;
Statesmen demand my counsel; artists dream
Of my approval captured, which, they know,
Confers their right to fame; the golden flow
Of commerce into channels dug by slaves,
Whose undiscerning labour guides the waves
Of wealth to purposes my wisdom planned,
With truth they feel, yet may not understand,
Makes fertile soil I sowed with hope; life yields
The first-fruits gathered from a thousand fields.

CORALIE *comes in.*

CORALIE

The fly to the treacle! The moth to the candle!
The best of our pleasures are stolen from pain.
I saw you—and clutched at the nettle again
Since chance had provided a handle.
My laughter leaves wounds. To a lover so shameless,
Forgetful, neglectful, unworthy, untrue,
Could I still care to offer a heart that is blameless,—
Whate'er the past record,—of treason to you?
Surely the best of it
Lies in the jest of it,—
Thwarted your triumph!—*you* win—but *I* laugh,
And defeat the old platitude,
Finding this attitude
Sweetens the wormwood of Love as I quaff.
Other far worthier suitors are wooing me;
Why should I spurn them? You claim to protest
At such payment in kind of the wrong you are doing me!
Delicate feeling!—You heighten the jest.
Oh! to have wasted and squandered for ever
The love of my life—the best years of my youth,
To have trampled on hearts whose devotion had never
Played treason to constancy, paltered with truth,

Just to feed your brief fancy,—to wear for a day
The crown and caprice of your favour imperious,—
Accept the spare kisses you tossed in my way!
But, your pardon! I would not be serious.

MICHAEL

You show your sense. The laughing mood
Ever became you. Your bright grace
Scarcely would find congenial food
In gloomy thought and a clouded face.
The wise, moreover, grudge to spend
Their force in rage whose shafts recoil.
Be angry only for some sure end!
Others than virgins waste their oil.
I swore to you no binding oaths,
Nor vowed eternal faithfulness;
I, connoisseur of love, that clothes
The heart as a garment, change the dress
From time to time,—a toilet trick
You could not justly blame. For me
Old sanctions, worn-out conscience-prick,
Are fireside tales. Relentlessly
I follow my own appointed course,
Taxing creation for my needs,
A fateful, ruthless, cosmic force
Beyond all codes, above all creeds.

If I grant you privilege to share
In the flow of energy, why complain
That your payment leaves me coin to spare
For more power purchased? Should the rain
Fall on no garden-bed but yours?
Are you aggrieved if the lavish sun
Squanders on others the wealth he pours?
Would you have the mountain-torrents run
Only to turn *your* mill-wheels? No,
Bid winds repent and fire reform!
Argue with earthquakes! I shall go
Through time on chainless wings of storm.

CORALIE

I understand.
Love was my servant through some lively years.
But all my hopes and fears
And happiness he seized with sudden hand,
And crushed their juice
Into the wine-cup guarded for your use,
When you should chance to thirst.
Now you are weary of the draught. And I,
Who dreamed of bubbles, wake to see them burst.
I shall not cry
Over my broken toys. I may regret

That he, of all my lovers, who alone
Has won the nobler side of me, should prove
Least worthy of emotions he could move,
And turn my new-born tenderness to stone.
For me the old light ways henceforth! And yet
I do not blame you, dear.
I loved you. That is over. And my pride
Sheds, through my laughter, on the thing that died
A last and only tear.

[*She goes out.*

MICHAEL

Were I not one with Destiny
My heart might almost conquer me,
Regretful for the fading out
Of this brief passion. Never doubt
Nor weak compunction shall oppose
My onward march. Yet my blood rose
Rebellious when she made that last
Assault with all her forces,—cast
Fire from her proud yet pleading eyes,—
Figured the mood of hurt surprise
In her quaint, drooping mouth, half-sad
And wholly humorous. Was I mad
To break so sweet a plaything?—No,
Where she has gone must others go.

Desire,—fulfilment,—then decay.
Time's curtain falls. She had her day.

A roving revolutionary ORATOR *comes in.*

ORATOR

Thou art the man !—Hither I came
With frozen bosom, soul aflame,
To speak to these my brothers,—bring
Remembrance of their suffering
Into their drugged and deadened minds,—
Bid them unloose the chain that binds
Their lives to benefit some few
Rich tyrants,—and encounter *you*.

MICHAEL

Proposing to rebuke the sin,
You meet the sinner. Well—begin !

ORATOR

Plunderer of the poor !—not now
I bid thee stoop thy haughty brow,
Nor cease thy mocking smile. I wait
For that long-wished-for hour of Fate

Which comes with slow, sure step. Ere long
The weak shall trample on the strong,
The humble dispossess the proud,
The voice of vengeance cry aloud.

You, if you deign to cast a thought
On such as I, believe me bought
With gold of cunning party-chiefs,
Or crazy with imagined griefs,
Or fostering ambitious hope,
Or spurred by vanity to cope
With problems I could never reach
Nor understand. So be it. Each
Measures another's truth and worth
By his own human, breathing earth
And flowers congenial therein born,—
Love's rose—or poison-plant of scorn.
But, be I what I may, the hour
Draws on. The vengeful Furies lower.
The portent stands revealed. I hear
The distant trumpet sounding clear
Its call to arms. From woeful den,
Foul street, and reeking alley men,
With scarcely human looks, will come
Beneath no flag, behind no drum,
The dark, mute legions of despair,

The hosts of retribution. Where
Will you take shelter when the throng
Whose groans have been your triumph-song
Gather accusing round, to claim
Full payment for their years of shame,—
When each for restitution cries,
The seamstress for her blinded eyes,—
The maimed mechanic for the limb
Your cog-wheels crushed,—the weary, dim,
And faded clerk for his lost joy,—
The mother for her reckless boy
Doomed by your cruel laws,—the wife
For love that coarsely brutal life
Soon mars and murders,—the sick child
For health unpoisoned,—the defiled
And haggard harlot for the gold
Of pure virginity she sold?

Yes, you may mock me. But, when Time
Gathers the harvest of your crime
And claims the tithe and first-fruit due,
God's laughter may be mocking you!

[*He goes out.*

MICHAEL

Though the fool wearied me, I found
A worthy field for contemplation

In crude but vital talent bound
  By morbid taste for indignation,
Which yields, no doubt, at humble cost,
  A counterfeit of drunken revels,
But means, like these, exertion lost,
  Dyspepsia, headache, and blue devils.

[*A party of the Salvation Army passes by and halts at a little distance. The* LEADER *turns back and addresses* MICHAEL.

SALVATIONIST

May God be with you, Friend! Forgive
His sentinel. To all who live
In His great world the challenge cries
To halt and answer. Surely dies
Each in his hour, nor is one spared
Of small or great. Are you prepared?

MICHAEL

There is no convert here to win.
The Hebrew Fetish, filtered thin
Through brains hysteric and ecstatic
With phrenzy from a London attic,
Gives doubtful cause for homilies pragmatic.

SALVATIONIST

Oh, suffer me to speak!
My voice is weak;
I am not learned, wise, nor eloquent.
My limbs are bent
By long, obscure, laborious days.
Yet have I power to make acknowledgment
Of God's good ways.
His light came through the clouds that wrapped my path,
Where all before was sorrow,
Till, on my night of sinful lust and wrath,
The glorious "good-morrow"
Rang through the music of an Angel's psalm,
And my torn heart grew calm.

MICHAEL

No token, truly, might express
Such calm in more becoming manner
Than all this pomp of martial dress
And noisy band and flaunting banner.
To every classic taste appeals
Worship in form so corybantic.
But, ere I dance your holy reels
And spread the Faith with pious antic,

I humbly ask to know the terms
Your saltatory creed has given
To those who combat sinful germs
With patent remedies from Heaven.

SALVATIONIST

Your eyes are not yet opened. It may seem
A fool's indulgence of a sickly dream
To follow Christ's commands and lose the whole
Of this proud, pleasant world to gain your soul.
But one day, when the distant bugle-call
From Death's advancing trumpeter shall fall
Faint through the hush of some voluptuous night
To rouse you from the languor of delight,
From wealth and warmth and revelry, the sound
Will load with terror the dark world around,
And you will run, like a repentant child,
To shelter in the bosom, just yet mild,
Of that great Father who doth now permit
Your tongue to mock Him with its shallow wit.

[*He rejoins his companions and they pray together.*

MICHAEL

The gift of prophecy will soon
Be counted cheap this afternoon!

But I am tired. The hopeless sea
Of stagnant, dull stupidity,
Whereon my bark must sail alone,
Laps in a mournful monotone
Against the prow, and I have caught
Some of its echoes in my thought.
Part is but physical; again
That lately-known, mysterious pain
Grips me with spectral hand. I wait
Till Science ends her grave debate.
To-morrow certifies my doom,—
Some fleeting sickness—or the tomb.
Well,—come the worst, victorious strife
Is crowned. I have not wasted life.

The air *breathes* prophecy to-day,
As yonder woman threads her way
Through the flushed crowd, her eyes reveal
Fire of the nymph's prophetic zeal
Who haunted, like the soul of Hope
The chestnut-shaded, sunny slope
Where my sight climbed to Alpine snow
Once in Italy,—years ago.
Her dreams were bubbles, but, at least,
She learned them from no canting priest.
Though tinged with something of the taint

That mars the sophist and the saint,
Free and undaunted moves her mind
Beyond the cage of womankind.

HERMIONE *comes in.*

HERMIONE

Again we meet. Time's wind has blown us far
Since the blue summer by the Italian lake
And one brief talk, that, like a branded scar
Dwells in my memory with the things that make
Landmarks of mental conquest. For the strife
Of clashing thought and argument so fired
My reason that all sane, coherent life
Grew from that chance encounter when, inspired
Each by the burning thirst for truth, we strove
To choose the battle-flag of them that draw
True weapons;—you disdained my watchword, love
Yielding your suffrage for a sterner law.

Has time's experience justified the creed
Of ruthless self-development, whose proud
Embattled logic made my faint heart bleed
That golden morning, while the hoods of cloud

Melted from cone and crag before the flush
Of dawn,—my fancied symbol of the truth
Coming triumphant, that no fate can crush,—
Pledge of the world's new birth, recovered youth?
Are you yet marching with no guide save Force,
Scornful of all that softens and restrains,
As weakness counting pity, love, remorse?
And has the world accepted you? Who gains?

MICHAEL

I gain beyond all question. I have done
That which I willed, have captured one by one
Fortune's defended castles. And the world
Gains also by the guardian flag unfurled,
The brave new countersign demanded. Souls
Cast off their ancient nightmare. Warm blood rolls
Through veins encumbered with the frozen sloth
Of superstition. Reasonable growth
Governs the realm of thought. A nobler way
Than where ascetic cowards crawl and pray
Opens for men to tread.
And how appears
Your dreamland tested by the uncourtly years?
Follow you yet that ancient cloud and fire
Through life's grim wilderness of parched desire,

Hoping, as I, to lead your caravan
Towards the unbounded destinies of Man?

HERMIONE

I dare not answer in exuberant tone.
I wander yet
Shrouded in dusk of dawn,—the path unknown,
The pale moon set,
And no sun risen, although the Eastern sky
Like a wan woman, when her love draws nigh,
Faint gleams of gold and crimson hope has shown
Through cloudy cares of jet.
I do confess the sad abandonment
Of my first expectation. I aspired
To wake the world at once with clarion call;
But the poor world is doubtful, languid, tired.
Few touch the perfect truth how one with all
And all with one are blent.
So now, in humbler hope, I rake the floor
Of life, and toil to rescue, here and there,
Some of those broken flowers we call the Poor
From dust-bins of despair,
Believing that from fertile soil of deeds,
Rather than barren sand of words, will grow
Herbs that might heal the spirit-wound that bleeds,

Now drugged with opiate " Yea " of futile creeds,
Or cauterised with Doubt's benumbing " No."

MICHAEL

I fear confession leaves you yet unshriven
By Time, that most tyrannical inquisitor.
A Prophetess, descended straight from Heaven,
Finds poor employment as a district visitor.
But grant me more acquaintance with the question!
To-morrow brings some worthy folk to masticate
Round my poor table. To promote digestion,
The tonic sauce of your enthusiastic hate
For all their shams and shibboleths would season
The insipid dishes of their trite morality;
And their departure gives an hour of reason
For you and me. Accept my hospitality!

HERMIONE

Cast me for sport among your Philistines?
Like the blind Samson of the Hebrew tale,
Their captive might give proof, when scorn inclines
To laughter, that resentment's powers avail
To tear down Folly's trusted pillars and crush
Those that have mocked. Prepare them; I will come.

[MICHAEL *goes out.*

'Tis hard to chain the passions. I should blush
For boastful, hot defiance, should be dumb
Before the gibe of scoffers. But as when
Ravening hounds pursue some stately deer
Majestically striding through the glen
With proud annoyance, undefiled of fear,
Yet gaining force till hard exhaustion brings
Clamorous insult that contests his sway
Dishonourably near, and blood of kings
Burns through his bosom, and he halts at bay—
So wears my patience out. Oh, early dreams,
How far and faint your gorgeous landscape lies!
How dim truth's ancient crystal window seems!
How hope grows cold! How inspiration dies!
This scornful traveller through the unknown land
Counts, looking back to our Italian day,
More milestones passed than I. Fair craft I planned
To launch from those blue mountains—where are *they?*
And where the kindlier comrade, who could smile
Yet sneer not, disbelieve but comprehend?
Whom that bright season made me hold awhile
The more and less than lover called a friend.
My heart turns traitor. I could almost ask
For subtleties of "less and more" to melt
And leave the friendship love. My failures task

My burdened resolution and unbelt
My sword-encumbered loins. His irony
Played on my climbing purpose with sad mirth,
And told how sun-struck waxen joints would be
That sealed my wings, till, drooping back to earth,
I moved among the weaklings then disdained,
Bent by their passions, sharing their desires,
With dead wood of ambitions unattained
Feeding the humbler hearth of mortal fires.
The hour foretold is on me. Fruitless loom
Whereon my spirit worked, to weave and waste
Unprofitable moonshine, mystic gloom,
Rest your perturbing shuttles! I would taste
The cup that women die for, comprehend
Rapturous agonies of passion, kneel
Before Love's inmost altar, shape and bend
A man's half-dominant obedience, feel
The conquest in surrender, and attain
To where the veriest wanton is more blest,—
Lose all my philosophic realm and gain
The child—*his* child—warm on my fruitful breast

[*The group of* SALVATIONISTS *near begin to sing a hymn.*

SALVATIONISTS [*Sing*]

Though wearied and encumbered
With weight of sword and shield,
Though wounded and outnumbered,
Benighted on the field,
Though your eyes are blurred and dim
While you watch the faces grim,
Never yield!

HERMIONE

These humble zealots shame me. Violence,
Contumely, scorn, assailing their harsh creed,
Recoil before the rampart-guarded sense
Of righteousness. Have I proclaimed the need
Of something larger, more impersonal
Than Dogma's crude solution of old fears
Only, faint-hearted, to surrender all
When my proud thoughts, like sullen mutineers,
Clamour against the stern controlling hand,
The embittering agonies, the toil, the scars,
The soul's long exile from her mother-land,
With home-thoughts mocked by unfamiliar stars?

[*She turns and looks towards London.*

Oh, hoarse complaining chorus, that repeats
The eternal captive-chant of Babylon
From yonder brick-built Hell! Your murmur beats
A muffled requiem for my task undone,
My warrior hopes brought low. I may not shift
The burden from my shoulders while the moan
Of human anguish calls me. Heart, uplift
An echoing answer to their undertone!

[*The* SALVATIONISTS *march away, singing as they go.*

SALVATIONISTS

With martyrs' blood anointed,
By martyred saints adored,
Onward and upward pointed
O'er lance and plume and sword,
With the feet that never lag
Goes the flaming battle-flag
Of the Lord.

SCENE V

The drawing-room of MICHAEL'S *Villa near Hampstead. A deep bay window lined with seats, opens on to a beautiful garden, with a wide prospect beyond.*

MICHAEL *comes in with a phial in his hand, and goes to the window.*

MICHAEL

Death! I have conquered all others, have loosened
the fetters that bind,
Have torn the dark curtain that smothers effete
aspirations of Man;
Have listened unmoved to the wailing of Thought in
the whirlpool of Mind;
Have walked, when the stoutest were quailing, through
mysteries barred by the Ban;
But my standard I bow to the stronger, I yield as the
brave to the brave,

I oppose to thy vigour no longer faint force of my labouring breath,
I disdain to reproach thee for giving my beauty, my strength to the grave,
For I won the full rapture of living at cost of thine envy, oh Death!
Did I flinch from the thought of to-morrow when medical pedants declared,
With mouths of professional sorrow, and eyes for a future of fees,
That hope—blessed word!—might be given of life for some period spared,
By the infinite bounty of Heaven, ere growth of corroding disease
Has ended the torture and anguish decreed as my merciful doom?
No, Death,—ere vitality languish, I call thee to finish thy task.
I shall march out defiant to meet thee, and, forcing the door of the tomb,
Escape all thy torment and cheat thee, good Death, with a drop from my flask.

[*He turns to the window.*

Night lays a soft veil on the dark land mine eyes shall behold nevermore,

Smug villa, respectable park-land, trim hedge-row and coppice and lane,
Fit setting, domestic and hateful, for broods dull stupidity bore;
At least I do well to be grateful to the dusk that blots out their domain.
I am robbed of my right to go under the waters of Lethe at last
To the tune of reverberant thunder, by the blaze of the lightning flash,
Alone to some precipice clinging in the teeth of the maniac blast,
While avalanche-echoes are ringing my knell as they mutter and crash.
But I break the delusion, I banish the puppets I governed in jest
With a booth for a kingdom; so, vanish, poor faded old drab of a world!
I am tired of your tinsel and spangles, of your eyes that have ogled their best,
Of your paint and your paste and your bangles, and the wig you have coloured and curled.
Our fleeting embraces are ended, and I pass from your bosom alone,
To be caught by the current and blended with measureless waters that run

From the heart of primordial fountains diffusing the power unknown
That abides where impassable mountains are crowned by an infinite sun.

[*He drinks off the contents of the phial and sinks on to the seat by the window.* HERMIONE *comes in. She does not perceive him.*

HERMIONE

Comes there no holiday, however brief,
For hearts not cold and dull?
Here wealth politely veils the grizzly skull
Of want, and muffles the crude voice of grief.
I panted for a lull
In the discordant anthem that I hear
Daily throughout the Stygian hemisphere
Of hunger-haunted labour where I choose
To set my workshop; and I turned again
To feel the warmth of joyous lives, and lose
One earthly evening's heritage of pain.
But sadder than the sound
Of all the wailing discontent that rolls
Through our grim nether-region have I found
The silence of these cloyed, lethargic souls,

Who live like human moles
Complacent in their darkness underground.

Oh, poor rich people, who have never known
The half of human life, you sell too cheap
Fate's precious gift,—the right to walk alone,
To climp the steep
Unconquered cliffs of knowledge, leave behind
Hard vulgar barriers that enfold perforce
The luckless multitude,—
To weave your thoughts a web of gold, refined
By play of graceful fancy, sweet discourse,
And gain the pure, strong mind
Whose light no film of wisdom can elude.
Alas! You abdicate
Most wantonly your proud inheritance.
Scarce do you send one momentary glance
Beyond that open gate
Whose bars have checked so many a brave advance
By Captives worthier of your golden key,
But barter all your treasured liberty
For toys of intellectual childhood, games
Played in a grown-up world of dolls and sums,
Cheap class-certificates and schoolroom names,
Rosettes and sugar-plums.

[*She perceives* MICHAEL. *As she is about to address him she starts forward, takes up his hand and looks into his face. Then she drops his hand and, perceiving the empty phial on the floor takes it up. She lets it fall again, and turns away sadly.*

HERMIONE

I looked for this; yet had not thought
To see the final refuge sought
Thus early. But the fiery soul
  Was fretting through its fleshly sheath;
No human courage might control
  The flame that gnawed beneath.
His was no coward heart, no brain
To slacken grasp beneath the strain
Of thought and aspiration known
To none but those who stand alone
On life's untrodden mountain-peaks,
Nor tremble when the thunder speaks.
  Life, as he viewed it, made no room
For failing body, weakening mind.
  His creed gave one relentless doom
To all whose footsteps lagged behind
In the great onward march, and spared
Himself no burden others shared.

Child of the whirlwind! Hast thou passed
Beyond the stormy straits at last,
And does the dawn unfold for thee
The secret of the silent sea?
Oh, who can read the stars aright
That taunt us with their lucid light,
Serenely gazing through the night?
At least thou didst not flinch, nor fear
The darkness, but, a mutineer
Against all guidance, took thy course
Where the wind blew with wildest force,
And scorned to hug the land, or seek
Safe anchorage in cove or creek.
Rest thee, proud pirate! I could shed
More tears for thee—perverse—misled—
Than for the whole inglorious throng
Who ask no questions, do no wrong,
Desire nor cross nor crown, but live
The apostles of the Negative.

He that does *aught* does well. The Love,
  Whose power thy pride resented, posts
Her watchmen on the heights above
  The slowly-marching human hosts,
And captures all whose wayward force
Beguiles them from the appointed course,

And leads them, with a gentle skill,
That blinds their knowledge, bows their will,
To trample down the path she clears,
And prove her noblest pioneers.

[*She sits down in the recess of the window, beside the body of* MICHAEL, *where they are partly screened by the folds of the curtain. The voices of other* GUESTS *are heard outside.* A GREAT LADY *comes in with her daughter.*

THE GREAT LADY

My dear, I warned you against wearing green.
A more becoming hue to-night would mean
End of all hesitation for our host.
You are eclipsed. His fancies are engrossed
With the strange woman who was giving out
Peculiar views,—though what they were about
I could not rightly comprehend; I *think*
She talked Theosophy,—or was it Drink?—
Or Woman's Suffrage?—I could hardly tell;
At any rate she talked extremely well,
While you, my dear, were almost ineffectual.
I wish these times were not so intellectual!

DAUGHTER

Brains have no influence when divorced from taste.
Her gown had nothing you could call a waist.
And did you mark the fashion of her hair ?
Small is the danger that a man would care
To marry such a person,—least of all
A man who fain would let the curtain fall
On past existence, and begin the life
That needs a cheerful, tactful, graceful wife
To use his fortune for the wisest ends,
Gain him a circle of the smartest friends,
Dress well, and look well, altogether be—
Perhaps I should not say it,—just like *me*.

[*Other* GUESTS *come in and group together, without noticing* HERMIONE *and* MICHAEL. *An* ECCLESIASTICAL DIGNITARY *addresses the* GREAT LADY.

ECCLESIASTIC

Dear Lady, let me tell you what delight
Our meeting has provided me to-night !
Mine was the privilege of crossing swords
With your good husband, in the House of Lords,
During last Session, and I like to feel

That something better than the clash of steel
Henceforth unites us. We have laid the ghost
Of conflict through the kindness of our host.
Ah, what a man! What courtesy! What tact!
He shows benevolence in every act,
And modestly conceals a noble heart.
Yes, though he may not take a leading part
In the great cause at present, I predict
That now, when his laborious hands have picked
From Fortune's branches the rewarding fruit,
The Church will shortly gain a new recruit
Such as Her work most needs.

A Political Celebrity [*Interposing.*

And the State too!
How much his eager brain will find to do
In helping the one Party that alone
Can save the country. But I thought the tone
Adopted by the lady who appeared
To claim his thoughts was rather to be feared.
Such councillors may sometimes lead astray.
She spoke of politicians in a way
That really quite surprised me.

Ecclesiastic

And I thought
Her conversation seemed to set at nought

Even graver matters. It is very sad
To think a woman's guidance may be bad,
That Faith's most subtle danger sometimes lies
In what should be the smile of angels' eyes.
I fear a traitress in our friend's dominions,—
She seemed to hold some horrible opinions.

GREAT LADY

How you alarm me. These are dreadful days.
I hope there's nothing wrong in other ways.
One fears for morals where one sees no piety,
And *such* queer people get into Society !

[HERMIONE *comes forward and stands by the recess of the window, holding the curtain so that the body of* MICHAEL *is not seen by the other* GUESTS.

HERMIONE

I will not ask you, friends, to pardon me
For hearing words that hinted my dispraise.
Let us at least have truth ! Though all unknown,
You stand in presence now of that which shames
Falsehood however brazen. Silently
Has the unseen hand opened your locked-up hearts

And freed the captive thoughts you vainly strive
To cloak with tattered phrases. Me you named
With hard suspicion for my influence
On him yourselves desire to mould and shape
For what ?—Forgive the woman you condemned
If she,—believe me, with reluctant lips,—
Return the condemnation.

Ask your hearts
What echoes this man woke in them. Did Love,
The wide, unselfish sympathy that yearns
To spend itself for some one, to enrich
Another human soul, inspire your warmth ?
He was a libertine, whose passion owned
No woman sacred ; yet the scornful pride
Of high-born, pampered women condescends
To barter self-dominion, soul and flesh,
For loveless, sumptuous supremacy,
His unacknowledged harem's golden crown.
He was a scoffer ; all your holy creeds,
Your formulas of government, your codes
Of social right and wrong he held as nought,
Mere crude material for his bitter jests.
Yet gladly would your Church receive his wealth,
And take the dubious credit of his name,
If he bestowed it in some cynic mood
That liked the tickling paradox ; while those

Who find, or feign to find, in party plots
Hope for a nation's law and liberty,
Would coax from him contemptuous tolerance,
Who laughed at party, liberty, and law,
Who claimed no nation and revered no rule.
Oh friends, you will esteem me hypocrite
If I declare the truth, that not your words
Of envious hate have hurt me, but the thoughts
Of your starved, meagre vision that can find
Life's value in such bubbles. He, at least,
Broke from your binding tangles of pretence.
His words bred actions. And his irony
Gives your small dreams a final answer—thus!

[*She draws back the curtain and shows* MICHAEL *crouched on the seat, his face white in death, his jaw fallen, his eyes staring lifelessly. A confused movement takes place among the guests, with cries and broken exclamations. Finally they rush from the room, troubled and excited, leaving* HERMIONE *alone with the body of* MICHAEL. *She sinks upon the seat beside it, and covers her face with her hands.*

SCENE VI

The Thames Embankment in London at night.
ATHELSTAN *alone.*

ATHELSTAN

May I never indulge in a cheaply mawkish mood?
Really a sense of the humorous shows no tact!
Just as my lazy mind is beginning to brood,
And my pedlar-stock of emotion is all unpacked,
The demon of laughter flashes a lantern-ray
On the threadbare sentiment trying to pass for new,
And the voice of the heart's own mockery wakes to say,
"Rather an ancient path that your thoughts pursue!"
This is the mine where so many a bankrupt brain
Quarries the pathos sure of its answering cheer
From the countless gallery-gods of the world, who fain
Would season their mental beef with a mustard tear.
Jerry-built dramas, Brummagen verse and prose
Enshrine all possible platitudes men could draw

From this well-known tap,—the river of peace that flows
Through the moaning town, the neck-bent bridges that flaw
The gleam of its face with their shadow, the golden bars
Of gas-lamps glowing on care-worn trees till the sheen
Of foliage, backed by the pallor of wasted stars,
Makes for the dull grey pavement a garland of green.
Footlights, scenery, supers are all complete,
The homeless vagrant, the woman whose life is wrecked,
Slink by the parapet, push for the crowded seat,
Thrilling the house with their time-preserved effect.

Stagnant and stale are life's waters. What is there worth
One moment of aching passion, of burning thought?
Our hearts are lifeless and tired and old from their birth;
We gather a mildewed harvest whose yield is nought.
All the great books have been written, the great deeds done;
Our songs and our laughter are echoes, our tears are ghosts;

Ever the circle of one monotonous sun!
Ever the human locusts in swarming hosts!
I have lived too late. No more is the altar afire
The world is a tottering cynic with pulses cold,
Making a laughterless jest of its young desire,
While its claw-like fingers are clutching at bags of gold.
It withers each natural growth with a senile sneer,
Quenches with critical dogma the heart's hot flame:
But I am a coward to-night! 'Tis a shameful fear
That fetters my sympathies thus with the fear of shame.
Old or new, there is ever the pitiful cry
Of human souls in the gutter, condemned to wait
For light that the slow dawn grudges them. Who am I
To look for a lordlier fortune, a nobler fate?

[*He leans on the parapet and gazes at the river.* HERMIONE *passes on the pavement. Suddenly she stops and turns to him with a cry of recognition.*

HERMIONE

You! Is it you?
Such years! Such years! My heart had almost lost
The hope of this our meeting,—yet I knew
My pathway through the desert would be crossed

Again by yours; for we are charged to tell
Tidings to one another, ere I go
Where sounds no more your tinkling camel-bell.
Is it not so?

ATHELSTAN

My sister of the wandering Arab race!
Ever thou comest when my weary heart
Betrays the appointed trust, and doubts embrace
Mine over-burdened limbs, and I, who hold
That man should uncomplaining act his part,
And leave his grim despondencies untold,
Whimper like some lame hound behind the chase.
Even now I viewed the lonely waste of sand,—
Our barren wilderness,—
Hating the bootless journey, half unmanned,
Inclining to surrender, to confess
Myself once more the thrall
Of tyrant fears, abandoned once for all,—
So I had hoped,—that shameful night when thou
Did'st watch my weak despair,
Where moonlight bathed the cypress-shadowed brow
Of that Italian garden, whose sweet breath
Hung warm and odorous on the swooning air,
And led my poisoned manhood near to death.

HERMIONE

Oh, do not talk of shame!
  Who leads the life exempt
From every human claim,
  Such as your hard contempt
Damns fiercely with reproof?
  He is not strong but cold,
Who dwells serene, aloof,
  Whose heart has never told
The tale of aching grief
  To one responsive friend,
Nor sought the true relief
  A kindred soul can lend
With thought and feeling, cast
  Harmonious in their tone,
When the red furnace-blast
  For each twin bell was blown

If such be shame, the brand
  Deepens on *me*. You laid
To no great task your hand,
  Armed for no new crusade.
But I the exalted vow
  That pledged me, over-bold,
Abandon, from the plough

Yield my relaxing hold.
I, whose presumptuous pride
Urged me to move apart
From others, act their guide,
Cheer the world's fainting heart,
My head now vainly try
To lift, despondent, bowed,
While traitorous voices cry
In my weak soul aloud
For all I hoped to scorn,—
The passions that perplex,
The doubt, the combat born
Of heart, young blood, and sex,—
To leave the pure cold height
Where fleshly joy or mirth
Died in the proud delight
Of soul,—and sink to earth.

[SHE *bends over the parapet and hides her face.*

ATHELSTAN

Surely 'twere no reproach to dwell
On earth, for us poor mortals!
'Tis something to be out of hell,
Though far celestial portals!
Fate's irony, for them that think,
Your certain course is shaping,—

To rise in Hope's balloon, and sink
With all the gas escaping.
Thus my prophetic jest comes true,
In sober sadness spoken,
Foretelling what should fall to you,—
When Time's rough hand had broken
Your spiritual toys,—your plan,
To shun the human highway,
For you must walk the way you *can*,—
Adam's and Eve's,—and my way.

HERMIONE

I have no heart to smile,
Though friendly be the laugh
That, mocking, would beguile
My weariness to quaff
The inevitable cup.
I own my womanhood,
I take the burden up,
Draw water, hew my wood,
Bow my rebellious will,
My quivering self-esteem,—
But my thoughts wander still
Back to my old mad dream.

Ah! if you understood
The half-joy, drowned in pain,
Here, when I feel my blood
Tell how I surely gain
Earth's greatest secret, bought
With loss of that one touch
Transcending earthly thought!
Is not the price too much?

ATHELSTAN

How shall the blind lead the blind?
What can I tell you?—I hold
This for myself,—that we bind
Garlands of crimson and gold
Out of the commonest flowers,
And that the life we must lead
In these flesh garments of ours
Holds something better indeed
Than cloisters of calm and content,
Trod by the feverish hope
That looks for a Deity pent
In caverns of thought where we grope.

We can know nothing. You flung
Wreckage of Christian belief,

Seaward,—dropped anchor, and sprung
Swift on the new coral-reef,
Buoyed by the sanguine delight
Known to explorers, who stand,
After long labour, in sight—
So they believe—of the land
Painted by prophets, who told
Legends to hearten mankind,
Tales of a gateway of gold,
And a garden of jewels behind.
Now the mist drapery melts,
Shows, in the glare of the sun,
Weeds too familiar, and belts
Of palm, and rock-fingers that run
Far out in mysterious blue
Of calm water,—and, sinking your head,
You acknowledge that nothing is new,
And that none of the riddles are read.

Futile to clamber in quest
Of vague, metaphysical goals,—
Moonshine of Heavenly rest,
Saving of worlds or of souls.
All future good we embrace,
Making one moment sublime,

Shatter the fiction of space
With our thought,—the delusion of time.
Though now you saw me despond,
Though oft I fail and forget,
Back comes the light from beyond
Clouds where the sun seemed to set
Till my belief becomes clear,
Far as the shadows allow,
This is Infinity—here!
This is Eternity—now!
Hope is a falsehood of youth,
Fear is the chain of a slave,
Sin—but to shrink from the truth,
Virtue—to stand and be brave.
Life flows as yon river flows,
Hiding all purpose or plan,
Bears us away where it goes,
The servant, the master of man.

HERMIONE

Would I might bravely share
Your calm, expectant view!
I know not—scarcely care
What creeds are false or true.
Only my heart requires
Some guiding star, some scheme

To rule my stray desires,—
Some hope,—some distant dream.
Though my old purpose fails,
The sense of work undone
With night-mare strength prevails
O'er the new wisdom won
From life,—keeps conscience full
Of morbid, worthless pain,
Keener than cure could dull,
Save one,—whose hope were vain.

[*She turns despondently to the river.* ATHELSTAN *draws nearer to her, and speaks in tones that tremble with emotion.*

ATHELSTAN

I read—though unspoken—your thought ;
Your bruised aspirations,—the sting
Of a hope torn, a dream come to nought,
Can be drowned in that fire-flushed spring
Where waves of forgetfulness flow
From the fountain of passion, and flood
Lovers' veins till they tremble and glow
With the beat of importunate blood.
Why draw back, treading close to the brink
With your mouth all athirst and aflame?

Let us soothe our delirium and drink
The fierce vintage of destiny,—claim
Of Life's scanty largess our share!
You are lonely. The path you pursue
Leads to darkness, negation, despair!
Turn aside! Here is shelter for you.

[*He takes her hand and draws her towards him. She resists; then yielding, sinks on his breast.*

ATHELSTAN

Look up, Love!—Your mouth!—Oh my heart,
How the blood sings and surges there!—Yours
Leaps and beats on my bosom! We part
From old falsehood,—for truth that endures.

[*She lifts her face to his. Their lips meet. They stand swaying in a passionate embrace. She draws back a little and looks smiling into his eyes.*

HERMIONE

Do you so love me, then?
Ah, it is good to live
Crushed in the strenuous pen
Of your strong arms,—to give

Will, conscience, reason, soul
Into your keeping, Sweet!
To lay all power, control,
And government at your feet.
Kiss me once more! I stand
Free from a halting thought,
Reckon my promised land
Too dearly might be bought
With loss of one warm kiss,
Now that your heart has shown
The response I feared to miss
For the love I feared to own.

[ATHELSTAN *moves somewhat uneasily and looks into her face with faintly troubled eyes. She continues in the same fervid tone.*

Mine!—I may tell you, now,
How the early seed was sown
That day by the lake,—and how
The plant has flowered and grown
In my bosom. Ah, but I tried
To break from it; sought the stern
Hard path where passion died.
But I lost it,—could not learn
To battle alone. And yet

I shrank from the treason-brand,
Held on for the high work set
By all pure Faith to my hand.
But now do you justify
My abandoned purpose. Nought
Nobler than this can lie
In the whole grey depth of thought,—
Two spirits that meet and blend
Through the fleshly symbol,—grip
That which will only end
With earthly citizenship.

Darling, I shall not fear
Reproachful eyes in the stars;
I listen, yet do not hear,
Under the golden bars
Of light on the river, a sound
Remonstrant murmured,—the trees
Are mute and approving,—drowned
In the liquid laugh of the breeze
Is the voice of my distress,
Of compunction for paths above,
For the virgin prophetess
Who is lost in an earthly love.
For better than all the pride
Of a sexual negative

And a self renounced, denied,
Is the love that I gain—and give.

ATHELSTAN

[*Speaking with some hesitation.*

I would be honest,—would not leave a chink
Where-through might falsehood creep. 'Twere easier far
To trust my fortune's star,—
Risk Time's revenge,—suffer you yet to think
Your boat safe moored beyond the tidal bar.
Oh, my sweet friend, forgive me!—You behold
Your own pure spirit's light
Turn my heart's pile of tarnished silver bright,
And take the poor unworthy stuff for gold.
I have not that to give
You justly ask;
Few drops, evaporating, fugitive,
Cling to the flask
My thankless life has drained.
You bring me all the hoard
Of love your soul has gained
Through virgin years, and stored;—
But I am wounded, scarred, and battle-stained.
My blood still glows
Here, as I hold you, with the buried fire,
The subterranean fervour of desire;—

My spirit knows
Its ever-aching hunger for repose
By sympathy made sweet.
Though losing all to say
This truth, I would not cheat
You of your star-paved way
And drag you down to soiling tracks of clay,
Unless you plant there, open-eyed, your feet.

HERMIONE

[*Breaking away from him.*

Oh pardon—pity me!
I would not plague you with unworthy tears!
My coward eyes can scarce keep dry to see
The foolish hope of years,
When seemingly fulfilled,
Lopped, without warning, by relentless shears,
And killed.
Nay, do not speak, dear love!—I understand.
At least you cannot lie;
And I would have you so, though all I planned
And hoped be slain thereby.
You do not love me,—save the name be given
To that material surge of blood whose beat—
Forgive me,—might have driven
You to some sordid *amour* of the street.

You want—not me,—
But just a woman,—any woman. No,
You shall not soothe my blistered vanity,
Saying it is not so.
It may be that I please your taste, afford
Some touch of mental comradeship, but there
Our spirit-union ends.
I trap you with my limbs, my mouth, my hair,—
As any Eastern concubine her lord,—
With just this further link,—a shade more rare,—
Responsive thought of friends.

But the soul-marriage whose pure fire could make
Atonement for my purpose unfulfilled,—
A great thing yielded for a great thing's sake,—
Owns here no altar. Yet I have not killed
The love that drags me down. Oh, spare me!—save
My weak soul from itself! Buy not the slave!
Leave me alone here with my misery!
A touch, and I am yours!—dear, loved one, hold
Your hot blood back? Be merciful to me,
Whom ragged dreams and tattered hopes enfold!

[ATHELSTAN *releases her. She shrinks away from him and staggers to the parapet. There she cowers into a dark corner under the shadow of the bridge that rears itself in the*

darkness close by, and hides her face, her frame quivering and heaving with passionate emotion. ATHELSTAN *turns away irresolutely and finds himself confronting* CORALIE *who comes along the pavement with a listless step.*

CORALIE

You, dear old friend! I hoped to gain
Some brief forgetfulness of pain
In listening to the whispered words
The dark stream brings from far-off birds,
And meadow-grasses bending down,
And woods, where Autumn sprays her brown,
And all the sweet old country sights
Whose memory haunts my wakeful nights.
Much more it comforts me to hear
Your voice, where many a buried year
Rings its lost echoes, to revive
Dead days you almost make alive
With your familiar face. Ah, me!
The woman moves who used to be.

ATHELSTAN

Why talk so sadly? Are not wealth,
Liberty, all that life can give
Your portion yet?

CORALIE

[*Abruptly.*

Yes, all—save health.
They grant me few more months to live.

ATHELSTAN

[*Moving impulsively towards her.*

Oh, my long lost one! In my heart
You have a chamber kept apart
By some old constant, jealous hope,
Deeming that we might chance to grope
Through the dark labyrinth of lies
Men nickname "life," and meet with eyes
Seeing more clear than in old days.
One added touch would serve to raise
Our doubtful, hesitating love
Into the passion throned above
All earthly change. And now, at last,
Clearing the jungle of the past,
We blunder to the city gate
Where refuge lies, and meet—too late.

CORALIE

Are you not free?

ATHELSTAN

Just now, on fire
With burning pity, brief desire,
I dared to offer one who sought
Most perfect passion, lofty thought,
My cheap small change of love. She swerved,—
Her tender sweetness pliant, curved,—
One moment in her course,—then went
Back to own pure element.
A listless liberty is mine
In glacial wastes, where never shine
The rays I dreamed of, when the glow
Of coming sunbeams touched my snow.

CORALIE

Then it is not too late, dear! I
Laughing have lived,—will laughing die.
If, till my tameless voice be dumb,
You choose to share my laughter,—come!

ATHELSTAN

You dear, brave woman!—No more
Will I question and analyse,
Probing my heart to the core,
Weighing the worth of its sighs

In the new self-torturing way
That our morbid wisdom has taught.
I go back to the old, good day
When passion could conquer thought,
And I say to you, "Take me! Give
What you can! I will be content."
I have come as a fugitive
From the land of my banishment,
To gather once more the flowers
In the garden that I knew,
While the sun of our life yet dowers
The lawn with glittering dew.
And under the foliage shady,
Where her voice in the old days rung,
I will find her again,—the lady
I loved when the world was young.
And though she be hurt and stricken
In the intervening strife,
Yet her pulses again will quicken
As I nurse her back into life.

CORALIE

It may be. Time shall show. I seem to droop
Like a sick flower upon a broken stalk;
But you shall be my gardener, and stoop
To tie me up with tender hands, and baulk,

If it be possible, the foul worm Death,
Who views my withering petals hungrily.
Oh, I am faint for want of one pure breath
That blows from brooding woodlands!—Come with me!

[ATHELSTAN *looks back once towards the dark corner where* HERMIONE *is crouched. Then he goes out with* CORALIE. HERMIONE *comes slowly into the light.*

HERMIONE

Through the blurred agony of my distress,
Over the tomb of still-born happiness,
I reach my hands, open my lips to bless.

I bless you, though my heart's rebellious cry
Tells of the wound whose anguish will not die.
I bless you—you, who scorned a kindly lie,

Who would not barter for my gold your dross,
Who left your winnings, though I paid my loss,—
I bless you, here beneath my cruel cross.

I am but woman, if the need prove hard
Of owning her light triumph, who has marred
Your power to love, and left your heart so scarred.

She conquers much, yet not the best of you.
Spite of my failure *that* remains *my* due.
We talked a language here she never knew.

But I have done with passion. This hard stroke
Comes to recall the nobler pledge I broke,
To humble me beneath the appointed yoke.

With lowly patience will I bend my pride,
Yielding that ancient Church, so long defied,
Another penitent to reprove and guide.

I may not stand alone. I hear the bell
Ringing my old delusion's funeral knell.
The great Love calls. Sweet, earthly Love,—farewell!

SCENE VII

An old-fashioned English garden. On a smooth lawn under the shade of a beech-tree with drooping branches CORALIE *lies in a low garden chair.* ATHELSTAN *is seated beside her. It is a beautiful day in mid-autumn.*

CORALIE

It was foolish of the swallows
To take flight so soon,
For the Indian summer follows
The dead harvest moon;
And however rich and sunny
Be the boasted South,
Yet sweeter than pure honey
In my burning mouth
Is the taste of breezes wafted
From an English wood,
With the Autumn brown engrafted
On its gay green hood,

With the bracken turning yellow,
And the wet, red leaves,
And, beyond, the orchards mellow,
And the last wheat-sheaves.
Though I would not prove a coward,
To lament and moan
If the roses are deflowered
And their petals strown,
Yet across the ruined garden
Of my life I feel
Cold, frosty fingers harden
To a grasp of steel,
And I scarcely check the treason
Of protesting pain,
As they rob me of the season
That is here again.

Oh, just once more, to wander
Where the crab-tree grows,
Where spendthrift hedges squander
Ruddy haws, ripe sloes,
While the drifting vapour settles
Over rusty ranks
Of gaunt and withered nettles,
Grimly guarding banks,

Where brambles, flushing hotly
On the herbage sere
Weave a counterpane of motley
For the drowsy year.

Flooding fast, remembrance brings me
Sight and sound and scent,
And a ghostlike circle rings me
With weird merriment.
I can hear the pheasants calling
On the dusk-veiled hill,
And the pat of acorns falling
Where the woods are still.
I am after striding horses
And I feel the reins
Drawing tight, and blood that courses
Through my fervent veins,
As I follow, follow, follow,
Where the hounds stream on,
Till their cry grows faint and hollow,
And the hunt is gone.
But again my feet are moving
On a moonlit pool,
Where the ice my skates are grooving
Has no power to cool

Eager blood, whose joyful riot
Seems to fire the white
Of the rime, inflame the quiet
Of the frozen night.
Then the long mysterious slumber
Of a snow-bound world,
When winding-sheets encumber
The dim landscape, furled
On the blurred and shapeless branches,
While life, for me,
Is a boat that pleasure launches
On a youthful sea
Of music, feast, and laughter,
Of charade and ball.
But this is the day after,
And a funeral pall
Blots out the radiant colour
As the lights wane low,
And the company will be duller
Where I soon must go.

ATHELSTAN

Oh my wounded wild bird!—What is worth the saying?
Could my life-blood help you it were quickly shed.

Words are coin dishonoured, barely fit for paying;
Speaks my heart in silence by your insight read.
Language can proclaim my selfish sorrows only,—
Mute for something nobler that perchance I give,—
Paint the barren land where I shall wander lonely,
Envy your enfranchisement, while I must live.
Even across the ache and agony of parting
Gleams the cruel flash of Fortune's taunting smile;
Bitter, envious anger in my thought is starting;—
Was fulfilment grudged me for so short a while?
After all I win not, never shall have won you;
Round your buried lover will your last thoughts turn;
Spite of wounds inflicted, of shame and outrage done you,
He, who mocked you, counted you a thing to spurn,
Held your soul and flesh, your light and darkness, living,
Owned your every feeling and your every breath,
Trampled on you, flouted you past all forgiving,—
Weaves the same enchantment for your soul in death.

Think not I reproach you, call for your compassion;
Fate shall never triumph in my moan again.
Punishment she deals I take in jesting fashion,
Mock the spiteful harridan with cool disdain.
Only would I ask your sympathy to soften
Something of your laughter at the Pantaloon
Fooled by dainty Columbine a trifle often,
Tripped by merry Harlequin a shade too soon,
Rather bruised and sore with pantomimic revel.
Though the winner's stakes were paid before I came,
Give the paltry halfpence left to one poor devil,
Who loves you very dearly,—and has lost the game!

[*He kneels beside her and takes her hands. She smiles at him, rather sadly.*

CORALIE

Loser you are, and I, and every one.
The People, there above,
Expect us to provide unconscious fun,
Playing this game of love.
With bandaged eyes we grope the school-room round,
While they our antics scan;
No woman the component *him* has found,
Her that sums all no man.

Oh kind, dear friend!—I would so gladly make
Your hungry heart content,
Had I the power,—would bid my heart forsake
Its old entanglement.
But helpless must I earn, with open eyes,
My own unpitying scorn,
Despising love, and, loving, yet despise
The face by falsehood worn.
While you, who seek Love's shady desert-well
To ease your burning blood,
Scarcely can find one shallow pool to tell
It was not always mud.
So must I hold a hateful memory dear,
Bow at one shameful shrine,
Leave you to tread a stony path austere,
Who thirst for passion's wine,
And have to be content with friendship,—smoothe
My pillow, mix my draught,
My life's expiring night-light nurse and soothe;—
No wonder some one laughed!

ATHELSTAN

Let us defy the laughter, spoil the jest,
Unhorse the threatening rider! Let us tear
Your life from cloud-veiled sunset in the West
Back to the Orient sky, for new dawn there!

Ah, but my soul requires you. Hear me! stay!
My throw once won save for Fate's loaded die.
Perchance the last thin film would melt that lay
Between us. It may prove a nightmare lie,
This fruitless thirst for your old poison-bowl.
I have loved other women, yet they seem
No more than ciphers on a once read scroll,
Or bubbles on a half-remembered stream.
So let the past be sepulchred. Forget
Your island of enchantment! Oh, sweet dove,
Fold your dear wings, nor leave me lonely yet!
Give me your life awhile! Give me your love!

CORALIE

Ah, to live and to love once more!
To know the loss that outvalues gain!
But the husks lie thick on the threshing floor,
Where Time's long winnowing leaves no grain.
Only for you does my bankrupt heart
Hoard what her granaries yet may hold,
Ever regretting that larger part
Another so wantonly stole and sold.
You are the truest, the best of all
Who have flung their fancy to waste on me;—
Oh friend, the squandered past to recall!
Your guerdon to give!—but it may not be.

Yet, shipwrecked thus on a mournful "no,"
We will face it gaily;—both have missed
The haven we steered for; I shall go
To my grave with some poor ghost unkissed
In my heart. But neither you nor I
Have been utterly cheated. Let us dream
Of days whose heritage will not die,
Perchance, when we are across the stream.
For we gave each other, if not the whole,
At least much love with no worldly stain,
A star-beam beckoning soul to soul;—
If it were *all*, have we lived in vain?

Perhaps, when I am under the grass,
As the year draws on to harvest-time,
And the days with burning blue eyes pass,
Like poets weaving a drowsy rhyme
Of battles fought and of love to come,
Some hushed, hot evening, thunder-crowned,
When the whole world waits for lightning, dumb,
Overloaded with silent sound,—
Just such an hour as wrought the spell
For you and me once,—when you shall hear
The first faint sigh of the night-wind swell
From the woods, your spirit will feel me near.

For I, who was, will be woven deep
In the good warm world I loved alive;
My flesh will slumber in flowers asleep,
Bees my blood for honey will hive;
I shall come with the hayfield's fragrant breath,
Or chime of a mill-stream's headlong mirth,
With the smell of rich damp leaves in death,
Of dewy herbage and plough-torn earth.

Then will your memory lose the sting,
And love, once broken and incomplete,
Will glide through the dusk with new-plumed wing,
And lay my laughing soul at your feet.
But now will I fiddle a wilful note;
My heart is tired of seriousness.
Decked for a carnival goes my boat;—
I want some chocolates;—ah, one kiss.

[*She starts up and stretches out her arms to him. But even as he moves to meet her, her head drops, her eyes close, and she sinks back dead.*

SCENE VIII

A secluded spot on the Surrey Hills. ATHELSTAN *alone. He holds a letter in his hand.*

ATHELSTAN

She writes from Rome ; harbour of refuge sought
  By many a tempest-broken soul, who fears
Voyage adventured o'er wild waves of thought,

And asks, beyond their drifted foam of tears,
  To tend some close-walled garden and obey
Rulers appointed as God's overseers.

Does the dim chancel twilight shroud her day?
  Perhaps for one so gentle, sensitive,
With steerage lost, it were the happier way.

Sorrowful stroke of chance that I should give
  To that great heart its death-wound,—I, who fain
Would weave her dreams a bower wherein to live,

The dumb reproach of those deep eyes, the pain
Wringing her mouth, the tearless agony,
Are haunting furies. Yet remorse were vain.

I shirk no censure, make no coward's plea.
I spoke no word of falsehood. For the rest,
I know not. Let perfection answer me!

Though my dead garden-lady took my best,
I loved this living woman, and her call
Found answering echoes in my home-sick breast.

Is it so great a virtue, after all,
This well-praised power of loving one alone?
Does love lose value save the stock be small?

At least I paid my forfeit. Have I known
The perfect satisfaction and delight?
Shall not my heart's Siberian march atone?

Voice, prove not bitter! What she dared to write
Scarce dare I read. Whither will judgment tend?
Reproach or pardon?—to assuage or smite?

[*He reads the letter.*

"With words of earthly passion, oh my Friend,
No longer may my trembling lips allure,
Yet love's triumphant anthem shall not end.

"Stripped of all fleshly taint, serene and pure,
The spirit-bond I blindly wept as dead
Links us in union while our lives endure.

"No more a wandering rebel shall I tread
Where the grim whirlwind walks. I have turned back
From paths with woven lightnings carpeted,

"Humbly to bear a private soldier's pack
Amid the legions I once thought to guide,
Following their march along the dusty track.

"For since my old proud confidence had died
In passion's weakness, where could help be found,
Save in one Sanctuary ne'er denied?

"Thither, a lowly suppliant, am I bound
To ask a refuge from the world and wait
A willing prisoner till the bugle sound

"Surrendering my reason, at the gate,
Into the hands of them that promise peace,—
Priceless exchange for what I abdicate.

"But though all mortal conversation cease,
My spirit, gliding on the wings of prayer,
Will ask for love's sake, and obtain, release,

"And fly to your abiding-place, and share
Your thoughts, your hopes, your labour, your delight,
Forgetful though you be, and unaware.

"No longer do I fear this earthly night,
For shining far across Death's sullen sea,
Lit by God's dawn, that island meets my sight

"Where shipwrecked spirits come to land, where he
Here lost, yet loved so dearly, may be cast
By God to her men called Hermione."

[*He folds the letter.*

Ah me! The world grows lonely. I am last
Of that small group whose lives Fate intertwined
By the blue lake one summer day long past;

And each has given the other wounds to bind,
And all have failed to gain their fancied goal.
Hope was hope's fetter, love to love unkind,

Soul's aspiration checked aspiring soul,
And whose the blame apportioned none can tell,
Nor why life's language is all hyperbole.

Beyond we come to Heaven perhaps,—or Hell,
Or just to nothing. Ah, dear woman, keep
The calm of echoing cloister, droning bell!

Yours is no boat for storms and waters deep.
Glide gently down your inland river now,
Which leads, at worst, to long lagoons of sleep.

I cannot pledge me to your creed, nor bow
Before your altar. Yet you strike my shield
With faith that challenges an answering vow.

And though my hopes have wandered far afield,
And resolution warps and virtues rust,
And cynic desperation makes me yield

Body and soul lethargic to their lust,
I draw my breath, and set my shoulders square,
And shake off low despondencies like dust.

In my soul's depth of silence shapes the prayer,
Whereto perchance none listens; may I dread
No foe save fear, no tyrant save despair.

May I, unboastful, proudly lift my head
To face life's changing look. May I despise
The tawdry flare of this woeld's gas-light, shed

On pasteboard pomp, and gilt, and tinsel lies.
Yet may I shun the subtler self-deceit,
That misnames art, and would idealise

The emotions of the morally effete,
Sickly, erotic dreamings, sensual woes,
Imagination's walkers of the street.

But may I earn a humble place with those
Who rule strong passions with a stronger will,
Whose hearts have secrets that they ne'er disclose,

Who help some stumbling brother up the hill,
Swerve for no earthly blandishment or ban,—
But wherefore thunder in heroics still?

One phrase comprises all,—to play the man;
To follow old romantic dreams, and keep
Some love, some laughter, till the caravan

Halts by the roadside, while long shadows creep
Over the darkening world, and this our sun
Of life is drowned in purple mist of sleep.
[*He looks towards the West, where the sun is near the horizon.*]

My thought wakes echoes! Here has sleep begun.
Soon, like a candle, will the western star,
Shining alone, proclaim the day is done.

Hovering vapours blur the chalky scar
On yonder slope, and hooded yew-trees crown
The broad green ridge to where the beech-woods are.

Softened in twilight spread, beyond the down,
Broad park and cottage-garden, woodland home,
And heath-side village, and far twinkling town.

I am a wandering spirit, who must roam,
Plaything of breeze and wave, till all tides end;
But mine eyes, weary with the smarting foam,

Look out, as to some gentle long-lost friend,
On this fair English landscape, where restraint,
Order, and peace, and wealth, and comfort blend.

My once rebellious voice is waxing faint
That cried against the cruel ravishing
Of Nature's maidenhood, the human taint

Soiling her gipsy blood. The marriage ring
Has brought her strange subjection, and we get
A peaceful matron for the once wild thing.

But I have learned to look with no regret
On faces grave with thought, where sensuous lines
Fading make room for higher beauties yet.

How small the part that circumstance confines
And moulds! The unchanging elements remain.
Alike on wilderness and city shines

The sun, riots the breeze, and throbs the rain.
Each heart, whate'er its fortune, cannot miss
The prize of joy, the privilege of pain.

To feel, to think, to strive, to suffer,—this
Has been my priceless portion. It is worth
All life to strike one blow, to gain one kiss.

Therefore, old captive but unconquered earth,
Who share your children's doom, my grateful heart
Thanks you, my Mother, for the gift of birth.

We, for a time distinct, never apart,
Shall soon again be blended. But, meanwhile,
I ply my business in the mortal mart,

Purchasing here and there a hope, a smile,
A little love, for love I gladly pay,
And brief, bright hours from sorrow thus beguile,

Not over serious in the game I play.
For neither you nor I are what we seem,
But symbols of a mystery,—and some day,

Perhaps, the soul inspiring us will gleam
Through all material texture, and the One
Will know the meaning of the Myriads' dream.

To what wide ocean do the rivers run?

[*He goes out.*

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